

# Synod Retreat Meditation: 'At home in God and God at home in us'

*On Sunday morning, Dominican Friar and former Master of the Order of Preachers, Father Timothy Peter Joseph Radcliffe's second meditation for those who will participate in the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops set to begin on Wednesday, 4 October focused on the theme "At home in God and God at home in us"*

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## Meditation n. 2

### 'At home in God and God at home in us'

October 1st 2023

We come to this Synod with conflicting hopes. But this need not be an insuperable obstacle. We are united in the hope of the Eucharist, a hope which embraces and transcends all that we long for.

But there is another source of tension. Our understandings of the Church as our home sometimes clash. Every living creature needs a home if it is to flourish. Fish need water and birds need nests. Without a home, we cannot live. Different cultures have different conceptions of home. The *Instrumentum Laboris* tells us that 'Asia offered the image of the person who takes off his or her shoes to cross the threshold as a sign of the humility with which we prepare to meet God and our neighbour. Oceania proposed the image of the boat and Africa suggested the image of the Church as the family of God, capable of offering belonging and welcome to all its members in all their variety.' (B 1.2). But all of these images show that we need somewhere in which we are both accepted and challenged. At home we are affirmed as we are and invited to be more. Home is where we are known, loved and safe but challenged to embark on the adventure of faith.

We need to renew the Church as our common home if we are to speak to a world which is suffering from a crisis of homelessness. We are consuming our little planetary home. There are more than 350 million migrants on the move, fleeing war and violence. Thousands die crossing seas to try to find a home. None of us can be entirely at home unless they are. Even in wealthy countries, millions sleep on the street. Young people are often unable to afford a home. Everywhere there is a terrible spiritual homelessness. Acute individualism, the breakdown of the family, ever deeper inequalities mean that we are afflicted with a tsunami of loneliness. Suicides are rising because without a home, physical and spiritual, one cannot live. To love is to come home to someone.

So what does this scene of the Transfiguration teach us about our home, both in the Church and in our dispossessed world? Jesus invites his innermost circle of friends to come apart with him and enjoy this intimate moment. They too will be with him in the Garden of Gethsemane. This is the inner circle of those with whom Jesus is most at home. On the mountain he grants them a vision of his glory. Peter wants to cling to this moment. ' "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."'. He has arrived and wants this intimate moment to endure.

But they hear the voice of the Father. 'Listen to him!' They must come down the mountain and walk to Jerusalem, not knowing what awaits them. They will be dispersed and sent to the ends of the earth to be witnesses to our ultimate home, the Kingdom. So here we see two understandings of home: the inner circle at home with Jesus on the mountain and the summons to our ultimate home, the Kingdom in which all will belong.

Similar different understandings of the Church as home tear us apart today. For some it is defined by its ancient traditions and devotions, its inherited structures and language, the Church we have grown up with and love. It gives us a clear Christian identity. For others, the present Church does not seem to be a safe home. It is experienced as exclusive, marginalizing many people, women: the divorced and remarried. For some it is too Western, too Eurocentric. The IL mentions also gay people and people in polygamous marriages. They long for a renewed Church in which they will feel fully at home, recognized, affirmed and safe.

For some the idea of a universal welcome, in which everyone is accepted regardless of who they are, is felt as destructive of the Church's identity. As in a nineteenth-century English song, 'If everybody is somebody then nobody is anybody.[1]' They believe that identity demands boundaries. But for others, it is the very heart of the Church's identity to *be* open. Pope Francis said, 'The Church is called on to be the house of the Father, with doors always wide open ... where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems and to move towards those who feel the need to take up again their path of faith.'[2]

This tension has always been at the heart of our faith, since Abraham left Ur. The Old Testament holds two things in perpetual tension: the idea of election, God's chosen people, the people with whom God dwells. This is an identity which is cherished. But also universalism, openness to all the nations, an identity which is yet to be discovered.

Christian identity is both known and unknown, given and to be sought. St. John says, 'Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.' (1 John 3. 1 – 2). We know who we are and yet we do not know who we shall be.

For some of us, the Christian identity is above all given, the Church we know and love. For others Christian identity is always provisional, lying ahead as we journey towards the Kingdom in which all walls will fall. Both are necessary! If we stress only our identity is given – *This* is what it means to be Catholic – we risk becoming a sect. If we just stress the adventure towards an identity yet to be discovered, we risk becoming a vague Jesus movement. But the Church is a sign and sacrament of the unity of all humanity in Christ (LG. 1) in being both. We dwell on the mountain and taste the glory now. But we walk to Jerusalem, that first synod of the Church.

How are we to live this necessary tension? All theology springs from tension, which bends the bow to shoot the arrow. This tension is at the heart of St. John's gospel. God makes his home in us: 'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.' (14.23) But Jesus also promises us our home in God: 'In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? (John 14.2).

When we think of the Church as home, some of us primarily think of God as coming home to us, and others of us coming to home in God. Both are true. We must enlarge the tent of our sympathy to those who think differently. We treasure the inner circle on the mountain, but we come down and walk to Jerusalem, wanderers and homeless. 'Listen to him'.

So, first, God makes his home with us. The Word is made flesh in a first-century Palestinian Jew, raised in the customs and traditions of his people. The Word becomes flesh in each of our cultures. In Italian paintings of the Annunciation, we see lovely homes of marble, with windows open onto olive trees and gardens of roses and lilies. Dutch and Flemish painters show Mary with a warm oven, well wrapped to keep out the cold. Whatever is your home, God comes to dwell in it. For thirty silent years, God dwelt in Nazareth: an unimportant backwater. Nathaniel exclaimed in disgust, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth' (John 1.46). Philip just replies, 'Come and see.'

All of our homes are Nazareth, where God dwells. St. Charles de Foucauld said. 'Let Nazareth be your model, in all its simplicity and breadth...The life of Nazareth can be lived anywhere. Live it where is it most useful for your neighbour.[3]' 'Wherever we are and whatever we have done, God comes to stay: 'Behold I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come into you and eat with you, and you with me' (Rev. 3.20).

So we treasure the places where we have met Emmanuel. 'God with us'. We love the liturgies in which we have glimpsed the divine beauty, the churches of our childhood, the popular devotions. I love the great Benedictine Abbey of my school where I first sensed the

doors of heaven open. Each of us has our own Mt Tabor, on which we have glimpsed the glory. We need them. So when liturgies are changed or churches demolished, people experience great pain, as if their home in the Church is being destroyed. Like Peter, we wish to stay.

Every local Church is a home for God. Our mother Mary appeared in England in Walsingham, the great medieval shrine, in Lourdes, in Guadalupe in Mexico, in Czestochowa in Poland, **in La Vang in Vietnam and Donglu in China. There is no Marian competition. In England, we say, 'The good news is that God loves you. The bad news is that he loves everyone else as well.' St Augustine said:** God loves each of us as if there were only one of us.[4]'. **In the Basilica of Notre Dame d'Afrique in Algiers, there is inscribed: 'Priez pour nous et pour les Musulmans' 'Pray for us and for the Muslims".**

Often priests find the Synodal path most difficult to embrace. We clergy tend these places of worship and celebrate its liturgies. Priests need a strong sense of identity, an *esprit de corps*. But who shall we be in this Church which is liberated from clericalism? How can the clergy embrace an identity which is not clerical? This is a great challenge for a renewed Church. Let us embrace it without fear, a new fraternal understanding of ministerial priesthood! Perhaps we can discover how this loss of identity is actually an inherent part of our priestly identity. It is a vocation to be drawn beyond all identities, because 'who we are is yet to be revealed' (1 John 3.2).

God makes his home now in places that the world despises. Our Dominican brother Frei Betto describes how God came to be at home in a prison in Brazil. Some Dominicans were imprisoned for their opposition to the dictatorship (1964-1985). Betto wrote, 'On Christmas day, the Feast of God's homecoming, the joy is overwhelming. Christmas night in prison... Now the whole prison is singing, as if our song alone, happy and free, must sound throughout the world. The women are singing over in their section, and we applaud... Everyone here knows that it's Christmas, that someone is being reborn. And with our song, we testify that we too have been reborn to fight for a world without tears, hatred or oppression. It's quite something to see these young faces pressed against the bars and singing their love. Unforgettable. It's not a sight for our judges, or the public prosecutor, or the police who arrested us. They would find the beauty of this night intolerable. Torturers fear a smile, even a weak one."

So we glimpse the beauty of the Lord in our own Mt Tabor, where, like Peter, we want to pitch our tents. Good! But 'Listen to Him!' We enjoy that moment and then come down the mountain and walk to Jerusalem. We must become in a sense homeless. **'Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head.'** (Luke 9.58). They walk to Jerusalem, the holy city where God's name dwells. But there Jesus dies outside the walls for the sake of all who live outside the walls, as God revealed himself to his people in the wilderness outside the camp. James Alison wrote: 'God is among us as

one cast out[5]: 'Therefore, Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his blood. Let us therefore then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured.' (Hebrews 12.12f).

Archbishop Carlos Aspiroz da Costa wrote to the Dominican Family when he was Master: "Outside the camp' among all those 'others' relegated to a place outside the camp, is where we meet God. Itinerancy demands going outside the institution, outside culturally conditioned perceptions and beliefs, because it is 'outside the camp' that we meet a God who cannot be controlled. It is 'outside the camp' that we meet the Other who is different and discover who we are and what we are to do.[6]' It is in going outside that we reach for a home in which 'there is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3.26).

In the 1980s, reflecting on the Church's response to Aids, I visited a London hospital. The consultant told me that there was a young man asking for a priest called Timothy. By God's providence, I managed to anoint him shortly before he died. He asked to be buried in Westminster Cathedral, the centre of Catholicism in England. He was surrounded by the ordinary people who came to that weekday Mass, as well as by people with Aids, nurses, doctors and gay friends. The one who had been on the periphery, because of his illness, because of his sexual orientation and most of all because he was now dead, was at the centre. He was surrounded by those for whom the Church was home and those who would normally never enter a church.

Our lives are nourished by beloved traditions and devotions. If they are lost, we grieve. But also we must remember all those who do not yet feel at home in the Church: women who feel that they are unrecognised in a patriarchy of old white men like me! People who feel that the Church is too Western, too Latin, too colonial. We must journey towards a Church in which they are no longer at the margin but in the centre.

When Thomas Merton became a Catholic he discovered 'God, that centre Who is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere, finding me.' Renewing the Church, then, is like making bread. One gathers edges of the dough into the centre, and spreads the centre into the margins, filling it all with oxygen. One makes the loaf by overthrowing the distinction between edges and the centre, making God's loaf, whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere, finding us.

One last very short word. Time and again during the preparation for this Synod, the question was asked: 'But how can we be at home in the Church with the horrible scandal of sexual abuse?' For many, this has been the last straw. They have packed their bags and gone. I put this question to a meeting of Catholic head teachers in Australia, where the Church has been horribly disfigured by this scandal. How did they remain? How could they still be at home?

One of them quoted Carlo Carretto (1910 – 1988), a little brother of Charles de Foucauld. What Carretto said sums up the ambiguity of the Church, my home but not yet my home, revealing and concealing God.

'How much I must criticize you, my church, and yet how much I love you! You have made me suffer more than anyone, and yet I owe more to you than to anyone. I should like to see you destroyed, and yet I need your presence. You have given me much scandal, and yet you alone have made me understand your holiness. ... Countless times, I have felt like slamming the door of my soul in your face—and yet, every night, I have prayed that I might die in your sure arms! No, I cannot be free of you, for I am one with you, even if not completely you. Then too – where would I go? To build another church? But I could not build one without the same defects, for they are my defects. '

At the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus says: 'Behold I am with you until the end of time.' If the Lord stays, how could we go? God has made himself at home in us with all our scandalous limitations for ever. God remains in our Church, even with all the corruption and abuse. We must therefore remain. But God is with us to lead us out into the wider open spaces of the Kingdom. We need the Church, our present home for all its weaknesses, but also to breathe the Spirit-filled oxygen of our future home without boundaries.

[1] W. S. Gilbert, *The Gondoliers*, 1889

[2] *Evangelii Gaudium* para 47.

[3] Cathy Wright LSJ *St Charles de Foucauld: His Life and Spirituality*, p.111

[4] *Confessions*. Book 3

[5] *Knowing Jesus* p.71

[6] Letter to the Order on Itinerancy

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